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STATE, PRIVATE, LOCAL PARTNERS CELEBRATE
PERMANENT PROTECTION OF HISTORIC TRACT

200 acres to be held in conservation for recreation and historic preservation

GRAFTON - Environmental Affairs Secretary Ellen Herzfelder joined Representative George Peterson, representatives for The Trust for Public Land (TPL), the Town of Grafton and the Grafton Land Trust to celebrate the recent permanent conservation of 200 wooded acres. Known as Hassanamesitt Woods, the property is the site of one of Reverend John Eliot's 17th century Praying Indian Villages, Hassanamesitt.

"Last year the land trust community and our partners in cities and towns across Massachusetts rallied with us to protect important parcels such as the Hassanamesitt Woods," said Secretary Herzfelder. "Acting on their own no single agency or organization could have accomplished what we have here; it is very gratifying to know that this beautiful land and its Native American history will be protected forever."

"I would like to thank the Department of Conservation and Recreation and Secretary Herzfelder for dedicating the resources necessary to help the community protect this historic parcel forever," said Representative George Peterson.

Federal, state, local, and private funds were raised toward the protection of the property. These include \$500,000 from the Town's Community Preservation Fund, a \$400,000 grant from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund distributed by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA), \$776,000 from the Department of Conservation and Recreation, and \$40,000 from the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

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Whitney Hatch, Vice President and New England Regional Director of the Trust for Public Land, said Friday, "TPL is so proud to have been a leader in a nationally significant project like Hassanamesitt Woods. This has truly been a team effort by many partners. We are thrilled that the Department of Conservation and Recreation was able to contribute the additional funding needed to enable permanent protection of the entire site. Federal, state, local and private funds are critical to successful conservation projects, and TPL enjoys the challenge of working to bring these diverse sources to bear to protect critical resources like Hassanamesitt."

The property offers a window into the area's rich Native American history. For years the land has been rumored to include the core remains of Hassanamesitt, one of 14 "Praying Towns" founded by Reverend John Eliot in the 17th century for native peoples who joined the Christian religion. One of only two Praying Towns to achieve full church status, Hassanamesitt was occupied by Hassanamisco, members of the larger Nipmuc Tribe. Importantly, this site has been undeveloped since the 17th century, suggesting that important archaeological resources may still exist on the land. This is in sharp contrast to the other known village sites that have largely been destroyed by the development of roads and houses.

Rae Gould, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer with the Nipmuc Nation said, "The Nipmuc Nation was elated to receive the news that Hassanamesitt Woods is now guaranteed to be preserved. We especially want to extend our gratitude to The Trust for Public Land, the Grafton Land Trust and others from both the Town of Grafton and the State who worked so hard to make this happen. We are looking forward to working with our partners to develop a long-term plan for this historic property and to continue our involvement in uncovering its history. This property holds a shared history that is important to both the Nipmuc Tribe and the Town of Grafton, and we will continue to respect that shared history as we move forward with this project."

Research conducted in 2003 by the University of Massachusetts (UMASS) Center for Cultural and Environmental History confirmed that the Hassanamesitt Woods property was within the boundaries of the Praying Town. Further, the historical records consistently point to this place as the location of the meetinghouse and the center of the village. Now that the property has been permanently protected, there will be the opportunity to continue to study and interpret the historical and cultural resources that exist on the property in a manner that is sensitive to the resource. A recent grant from the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission will be used to fund a cultural resources analysis of the land, a critical next step in understanding the extent of the resources that exist on the land.

This research, along with potential future archaeological work will expand the knowledge base about Praying Villages and will offer a tremendous opportunity for education and interpretation of the site. Project supporters in Grafton are eager to involve local schools and residents in educational activities around the property. As part of that effort to educate the public about this incredible historic resource, the Hassanamesitt 350 Committee has planned several events to celebrate the 350th anniversary of the founding of the village of Hassanamesitt, which later became the Town of Grafton.

In 2002, the Grafton Board of Selectmen and the Grafton Land Trust asked TPL for assistance in protecting Hassanamesitt Woods. TPL agreed to partner with the Town and accept the right of first refusal to purchase the land from the Robinson family for \$2.1 million.

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Susan Mills, Chair of the Grafton Selectboard said, “A great deal of thanks goes to the partnership that opened our eyes to this gem in our own backyard. Thank you so much to everyone who wrote letters, made calls, twisted arms and believed in what could be done. Together we have kept a piece of our past intact and at the same time created a piece of our future.”

Richard Dion, President of the Grafton Land Trust said, “My thanks go out to Roger Hohman who initially made known to us the historical importance of this property. Since then this has truly been a team effort, and we thank all of our partners who have contributed to this tremendous outcome. We especially want to thank the many individuals and families of Grafton who so generously contributed to this project. Future generations will be grateful.”

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